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JOHN HAY IN LITERATURE.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

THE statesman whose death is so recent that our sense of him as a living force cannot yet accept the fact, may not at once find the place in our political history which his rare gifts and great qualities had been making secure for him. But John Hay's relation to our literature was already so definite before he died that one may venture to speak of it without the effect of undue haste, though one may not so much try to fix the terms of a final judgment of his work as to ascertain some of the reasons of his being poet, romancer and historian, such as he was, without being at his greatest either. He lived to be recognized as the ablest public man of his time, the inventor of a diplomacy that was sincere, courageous and generous, and it has seemed to me, in reviewing what he wrote, that he might have had an equal and a kindred fame in literature. For more than half his years one may fancy him standing at the parting of the ways, where he might have taken the path to preeminence in authorship, as finally he took the path to the supremacy in statesmanship which he really achieved. It is as if the choice was rather decided for him than made by him, so passive, so almost indifferent, was the attitude he kept in the eyes of the spectator. Before he entered public life as one of Lincoln's secretaries, he had given proof of his talent and his skill in his class poem at Brown University, where he received the academic training still exceptional with our literary men. To say it was a class poem is sufficiently to characterize it, perhaps; and to add that it was easily better than most class poems is not to praise it overmuch. There was the graceful handling of a familiar measure, and the easy mastery of the forms which a young writer's reading makes his second nature; but it was more than commonly representative of the poet's own

thinking and feeling. There was security of touch in it, though there was not yet the maturity which early characterized his prose, and which is present in such marked degree in his paper on Ellsworth, the young captain of Zouaves who fell in the first months of the Civil War.

It was with this paper that my own knowledge of Hay in literature had begun; but four or five years later, when American literature on the continental terms was ceasing to be New England literature, there came to me, as assistant editor of "*The Atlantic Monthly*," a paper from Madrid, written with a certain very instructed command of the facts, as well as with a literary charm which had the freshness of surprise. It was the first of the chapters which went afterwards to form the brilliant volume, "*Castilian Days*," and was the vivid study of "*A Field Night in the Spanish Cortes*"; but, authoritative and vivid as it was, it showed an inequality which is most marked in its difference from the second paper. In his study of the Cortes he is carried a little, or call it a good deal, beyond himself, by the dramatic picturesqueness of the material, which he feels so intensely; and there are reversions to younger modes and terms of expression; but, in the more analytical and descriptive sketches which rapidly followed, there are far fewer, and oftenest none, of these survivals of youthful ideal. For a writer still so young, he keeps himself astonishingly in hand; if he escapes the rein now and then, it is in the humor, which is largely an ironical wit, or an excessive sarcasm, with also a touch of something academic in the attitude. The prevalent note is that of a morality severe almost to austerity; it is all very democratic, very American, very Protestant; but the severity is not discordant with a lyrical pleasure in the beauty of the theme. Spain lives under his hand, and the book itself lives through its fidelity to the facts, and will always hold its high place among the three or four books by American hands in which the life of an alien people is rendered with unsurpassed intelligence. There are chapters, and when there are not chapters there are passages, of singular beauty, where the author allows himself to be a spectator, a charming commentator, who has no duty to his reader but to make him see the thing as it is. The range is very great, from the note of slight, transitory social phases to the study of important political aspects, which neither he who wrote, nor we who read, could then

have imagined equally transitory. It was the hour when the friends of Spain hoped for a Spanish Republic; and it is one of the most interesting offices of Hay's delightful work that it forms the historical record of this generous hope, now long extinct.

If I recur from it to his earlier monograph on Ellsworth, it is certainly not to praise it less, but to recognize more fully the worth of a personal tribute, which is also, however unconsciously, an inquiry in American conditions and passions at our most fateful hour. It is valuable for rare analysis and insight, and touching for the poetry which colors the figure of the young hero in the tints of the Tennysonian idyls then so fresh in youthful minds; while the darkness of the reality with which the writer dealt seems to have sobered his grief and made him anxious to render the likeness of his friend with a touch unshaken by emotion. It long preceded the Spanish papers in "*The Atlantic Monthly*," but another contribution still preceding these was that with which my editorial satisfaction in Hay's work began, and which seems to me peculiarly worthy of mention. The paper, which he called "*The Mormon Prophet's Tragedy*," relates to the assassination of Joseph Smith, and the expulsion of his followers from Nauvoo, which founded the Mormon rule so enduringly in Utah, and it is striking not only for the sort of self-restraint which the writer shows in the Ellsworth paper, but for the knowledge of the Western frontiersman, now obsolete. His character, in its wild burlesque, and in its picturesque ferocity, is caught with humorous intelligence; and, in the portrayal of real persons and events, the critical reader will find intimations of that sense of the grotesque which afterwards expressed itself in the "*Pike County Ballads*." It could have been written only by one directly familiar with the life and personally cognizant of the types, but with the instinct and culture enabling him to remain above them. Such a witness might have given us a picture of that bygone West which no other could portray with the requisite perception and imagination. Hay alone had the scope and penetration which would have sufficed for the large masterpiece still wanting among those faithful minor studies in which our literature abounds.

The Spanish studies were often journalistic in the actuality of their material, though so essentially artistic in form and manner; and, when Hay resigned his place at Madrid and returned to

America, it was presently to give himself very frankly and devotedly, if not fully, to journalism in New York. I doubt if he felt this a descent from the literary heights which some of us like to imagine overlooking the newspaper levels. He was in love with the looks of public life, as they changed from day to day; and he may have unconsciously turned to journalism as a form of political activity. He had much to say of that life,

"Its fluctuations and its vast concerns;"

and he must have been aware of saying it strongly and attractively, of being the contemporaneous historian which the journalist is at his best. He would have been the last to let any one else distinguish between his journalism and his literature. He knew well how nearly they were allied; and, if I pass over his criticisms of public tendencies and events, it is with no slight for his leading articles, or the leading articles of others. I can even imagine that he wrote them with greater zest than his sketches and poems. He was not only framed for that kind of work, but he found in it shelter from the irksome personal notoriety which attends the poet and the novelist. The impersonality of journalism was for him the disguise within which he could be most truly himself; but, when he was most truly himself, he must have felt himself at odds with his disguise, for he was primarily, if not finally, as much an artist as a polemist. It all ended, those splendid and useful labors, in broken health; and when he left New York and went to live in Cleveland, away from the work that had invalidated him, there was a tacit expectation among those who valued him most for the inventive in him, that now he would give himself to "pure literature," as they would have called it, more arrogantly than he would have allowed, in distinction from journalism. He had already offered proofs of his gift in poetry, and if in fiction he was yet to do his most successful and notable work, it was with a shrinking from the implications in which he left it lastingly anonymous. I must not do more than guess at his authorship of "The Breadwinners," or do other than passingly touch upon its traits, since he never would own it. It dealt with the labor question in the old persuasion concerning united labor, and it cannot be found a modern criticism of economic conditions. But it has great merit in its characterizations, especially those picturesque and eccentric

embodiments of our life which seem always to have interested and amused Hay beyond others. The people in it apparently the most spontaneously and importantly treated are not the "gentlemen," but the non-gentlemen, not because they were more to the author's taste, but because they were more to his talent, and possibly more to his interest. The author, whether he was Hay or not, was like him in divining these as the more genuinely American, the more authentically Western, and what was always claiming Hay in his inventive work was the American and the Western. He felt it the material of the future, the stuff out of which a new manhood was to be fashioned into figures unseen before. I think the best things in "*The Breadwinners*" are the sketches of the local politicians, the leaders who can swing their wards; and, when the account is made up by the future literary historian, I believe the author, whoever he was, will be found to have first portrayed, if not first understood, the American Boss, made or in the making. Toward our crude potentialities, his genius involuntarily turned from our provisional gentility, bearing the image and super-scription of Europe, ineffectively graven or faintly stamped. It was his instinct for the value of the primitive which enabled Hay to know the greatness of Lincoln, though he long stood so close to it.

The sense of the backwoods, the knowledge of the frontier, inspired the longing to realize it in such shapes as loom large and rude in the "*Pike County Ballads*." He gave the name of these ballads to the volume of verse which he printed; but there are only four of them, as the reader, I think, will realize with surprise. The impression they made and have left is out of proportion to their bulk, and I am afraid I should say in some moods, to their worth. In other moods I should say that their worth transcended even their large impression. They belong to the very few results in any of the arts which have been of absolutely Western cause. One cannot imagine an Englishman imagining them; one cannot imagine a New-Englander imagining them. Their heroes are as native as Hosea Biglow, or Birdofreedom Sawin, and they represent the West as these represent the East. It was contemporaneously supposed that the "*Pike County Ballads*" were inspired or provoked by the Pike County balladry of Bret Harte, and they were first accepted as imitations or parodies. I believe they were actually written earlier, but if they were

written later they were of a priority which any comparative study will reveal. They are of a wilder humor, and of a larger effect. I do not mean to undervalue Harte's work, when I say that it embodies persons, and Hay's suggests conditions—of course with an exaggeration agreeable to the make of the types showing in them. Their author is said to have said in later life that he wished people would forget them. This might have been in some moment when the sense of that which was involuntary, which was almost inevitable, in them did not so fully possess him. At any rate, they remain, and in verse they will as infallibly carry his fame as the "Biglow Papers" carry Lowell's. It is rather cheaply paradoxical to say that a spirit less delicate, less sensitive, than that of such a youth as Hay was would not have felt the wild allure of such types as Jim Bludso, Tilman Joy, and their like in "The Mystery of Gilgal" and the ballad of "Little Breeches." But without the background of the new country, where individual freedom counts for more than anywhere else, he might not have been able to show in such strong relief the social and political facts studied in such poems as "Sunrise in the Place de la Concorde," "The Sphinx of the Tuileries," "The Prayer of the Romans." He is not æsthetically more himself in these than in the "Pike County Ballads," which will outlast them; but he is more ethically himself. Many young poets of his day, of the same deeply Tennysonian reading, might have written a poem like "Guy of the Temple," and many did write the like, though few so well. But only such a poet as Hay, with his varying qualities, origins and traditions could have written the others, with their (now, perhaps, old-fashioned) American sympathy for all the oppressed.

In all his literary work Hay was prevalently a moralist. His book on Spain is, doubtless, the most constant witness to this fact. He can hardly see anything of that unmoral life without wishing to moralize it. His conscience is restlessly at work, and will not let him be till he has warned himself, mockingly or austere, that he is not to enjoy this or that, without taking account of its spiritual, social or political nature, and is by no means to find pleasure in it because it is merely pretty or picturesque. I venture to think rather than to say that from the stress in which his tendency toward the æsthetical and his tendency toward the ethical were pitted against each other, he found no peaceful

issue, no entire reconciliation, except in "The History of Abraham Lincoln." There his sense of what is great in human nature, which can be ennobled only as it is self-ennobled, together with his love of what is poetic and heroic in the endeavor of a people toward light and right, is reconciled in the treatment of a vast theme claiming his highest powers as a lover of letters and a connoisseur of men. But, in any wish to analyze this great achievement, one is stayed by the difficulty, the impossibility in great part, of distinguishing his work from the work of his colaborer and friend, Nicolay. They were united in the preparatory studies; and, though they separately wrote chapters and episodes, they came together in the reciprocal criticism which was essentially joint authorship. Besides, the scheme of the present slight affair, so far as I have framed any, implies the consideration less of Hay's performances than of his tendencies, and of his tendencies as I witnessed them.

I saw him during that period of quiescence in Cleveland, when he was conjecturably choosing whether, with his ripened powers, he should be artist or diplomatist, or, rather, as it has sometimes seemed to me, which part he should let choose him. I do not believe he would have cared for the public honors which might have come to him by election to this office or that; but I do not assume to know that he would not. What I know is that he then spoke of a local movement to bring him forward for Congress, which he was strongly discouraging. He treated the notion with a sort of humorous reluctance, but he may at the same time have felt its temptation; and he intimated the like reluctance, but not so humorously, when President Hayes offered him the office of Assistant Secretary of State. In his retirement he was, perhaps, cherishing the hopes, if not the plans, of literary work; but of this I will not be so sure as of the sort of yielding which I fancied in him from the moment he mentioned the President's offer.

When we next met, three or four years later, in London, he told me of a piece of fiction he had done, and let me see some chapters, or perhaps the whole, of it. His mind had again turned in that direction, but, doubtless, always with a deeper and stronger pull towards public life. It was the moment when the novel, "Democracy," was making an appeal to English curiosity by its satire of political and social conditions in America, and more especially in Washington. Mr. Gladstone had read it, and talked

of it everywhere, and had set everybody else to reading it. No doubt it was often spoken of to Hay, who was anxious to have it believed he had not written it. His wish implied no criticism of it; only he had not written it; and the well-guarded secret of its authorship has long since ceased to involve his name.

Afterwards, in Washington, he was for many years exclusively employed with his work on "The History of Lincoln." But in this it was doubtless the political rather than the literary attraction which was stronger for him. He must have been glad to know that he was dealing with one of the most tremendous episodes in the life of the world, and that, in the very treatment of the subject, the what of it was infinitely paramount to the why of it. If this is true, it marks the moment in which the man of letters was finally subordinated in his distinctly dual nature to the man of affairs, of public affairs. We may fancy that, up to some such time, it had always been possible for him to turn again, and, if he would, be one of our first poets, one of our first novelists, one of our first essayists, as he certainly became one of our first historians. His relinquishment of any such ambition need not have been explicit, or even conscious; it would have effected itself, as such things do, without his intention.

His work on "The History of Lincoln" filled up the interval when he was out of public life, during three administrations; and it was, probably, a sacrifice when he returned to it, at President McKinley's strong urgency, as Ambassador to England. His service as Secretary of State was under our own sky, and in our own air, and John Hay, whatever he knew of the world elsewhere, or however it had interested his mind or amused his fancy, was very helplessly and inalienably American. He was American and he was Western by virtue of that very fineness of spirit, that delicacy of mind, that gentleness of heart, often imagined incompatible with our conditions. There was never in him any peevish revolt from these; he accepted them, as he accepted our heat and cold; they were the terms of our being worth while.

Something of this is evident in all he wrote. In the great history which he contributed to our literature; in the admirable study of a foreign life which he left; in the striking, if strikingly unequal, poems of which he always thought so modestly, he avouched his ability to have done what he wished in literature, if

only he had wished it enough. He showed in these the potentiality of a great popularity, when he turned from them for the other career which was not more than equally open to him. Yet he chose to do his greatest service to the public independently of the popular choice, and he, the most innately American of our statesmen, came to represent what was most European in the skill of the diplomacy which he practised. We shall all of us love always to think that the frankness, the honesty, the brave humanity which characterized it was the heart of Americanism in it. It was, at least, what we could so perfectly understand that, in any moment of hesitation concerning this or that fact of it, we could say to ourselves that it must be right because Hay did it. With those who were his contemporaries, there will always remain a regret that he did not take the popular way, so that he might have stood at his journey's end with the three or four of our Presidents who were also our greatest men.

W. D. HOWELLS.